

Another Original History

When we describe the present, we interpret the past. History is endlessly interpreted and reinterpreted from the present's perspective. But our knowledge of the past also interacts with our understanding of the present. And at any one moment of the present, different interpretations appear and compliment or contend with each other. Currently the dominant interpretation of American experimental film history follows Sitney's elaboration of the visionary tradition which starts with Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). This point of origin is valid for Sitney's version of the avant garde's organic unfolding which he describes so that each sequential film or filmmaker fulfills a visionary teleology. But his version of the beginning closes off other traditions, other possibilities. [discuss visionary--romantic, visual]

Lewis Jacobs provides a suggestive alternative in his essay, "Experimental Cinema in America: 1921-1947." He indicates several dozen innovative independent predecessors to Deren and expands the field beyond purely visionary concerns. A major retrospective and reassessment of the pre-Deren experiential scene would alter current assumptions. [Chris Horak] For example, we could consider the highly poetic and abstract organization of photographer and filmmaker Ralph Steiner's documentary studies, *H2O* and *Surf and Seaweed*. The abstract light, shadow, and sound compositions of Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth also deserve reconsideration as aesthetic objects in their own right as well as early examples of graphic cinema. Jacobs' description of James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber's *Lot in Sodom* (1934) sounds like a call for a double bill with Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*:

Its brilliant array of diaphanous shots and scenes--smoking plains, undulating curtains, waving candle flames, glistening flowers, voluptuous faces, sensual bodies, frenzied orgies--were so smoothly synthesized on the screen that the elements of each composition seemed to melt and flow into one another with extraordinary iridescence. (--)

Most startling in Jacobs' history is his mention of 15 films from the early 30s which he sees as directly derived from Dziga Vertov's theory and practice. Given the current positive reevaluation of Vertov, a retrospective of these American children of the Russian innovator would be revealing.

Jacobs himself wrote as a leading critic of independent film in the early 30s. With others he published five issues of *Experimental Cinema* (1930-33) which championed both left wing politics and innovative filmmaking. With a special interest in Soviet film, the magazine included translations from and discussions of the Russian cinema and tried to save Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico!* from Upton Sinclair's mutilation. In the second issue Jacobs argued that critics needed to replace their moral, literary, and pictorial approaches to film by understanding film as a plastic art based on time, motion, and image. Articles in *Experimental Cinema* also took up issues of unionization in Hollywood, imperialist exploitation of Cuban images and movie markets, and the development of a worker's cinema. *Experimental Cinema* did not last very long, but it gave evidence of radical film professionals with a genuine native concern for developing politically and aesthetically left cinema in the U.S.

According to Jacobs, worsening economic conditions and rising political resistance pushed most independents toward social documentary by the mid-30s. Two excellent studies of the 30s Worker's Film and Photo League and related political documentary by William Alexander and Russell Campbell detail that history. The radical documentaries were formally as well as politically innovative, especially when compared to the commercial newsreel and travelogue type of documentary prevalent at the time. For example, instead of shots of demonstrations from cameras placed safely beyond the action, behind police lines, and taken with telephoto lenses and cameras mounted on tripods, the Film and Photo League newsreels showed hand held shots from the midst of the protestors. Nevertheless, the overall production of those films usually subordinated artistic innovation to an assumed need for conventional communication, populist and Popular Front rhetoric, and *Native Land* (1935), arguably the movement's greatest achievement, has a call to yeomanry and patriotic values which seems strangely naive and sentimental to later radicals.

From a contemporary perspective, I find much more compelling some of the League's marginal works such as Maurice Bailen's well executed home movies of May Day marches and Communist picnics--fascinating for their visual documentation of everyday life in the Party--and C. O. Nelson's *Halsted Street*, a long travelling shot on the famous Chicago Street, displaying daily life and diverse ethnic neighborhoods. The comic short *Pie in the Sky* (Elia Kazan, Molly Day Thatcher, Irving Lerner, and Ralph Steiner) uses simple camera and editing tricks with a partially improvised story satirizing the Salvation Army approach to the Depression's suffering, and it contains an antic set of adventures showing down-and-outers having spontaneous fun in a junkyard. When a film asserts a vision of the oppressed's creative imagination, it stands out as notably different from the more common image of noble suffering and virtuous leftism often used and over-used in the social documentary tradition.

Jacobs mentions two additional developments that shaped experimental cinema. In 1935 the Museum of Modern Art recognized film as an art worthy of support by beginning low cost distribution of notable classics to nonprofit exhibitors. This distribution service created the basis for film study in university classrooms and exhibition in film societies. In addition, MoMA's regular screenings of film art had a profound effect in New York City by providing general public access to otherwise unseen work.

World War II also changed the institutional base for independent film. Faced with training millions in and out of uniform and propagandizing the population, government leaders turned to 16mm film as a primary means of communication. This changed both 16mm equipment and filmmakers' training in a decisive way.

